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SUBJECT: FARC-ELN ABUSES CREATE HUMANITARIAN NEED IN ARAUCA

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[B](#). 07 BOGOTA 4315

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SUMMARY

[1](#). In the first weeks of 2008, fighting between the FARC and ELN led to the displacement of over 4000 people in Arauca department. The FARC is trying to wrest oil-rich areas from the ELN, using selective assassinations and displacement. Meanwhile, the ELN pressured fleeing residents to stay. International organizations with a presence in Arauca are helping the GOC and local officials to aid Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in seven communities. Still, these communities' aid needs have exceeded humanitarian groups' capacity to deliver. Due to the humanitarian impact of the FARC-ELN violence, the GOC and relief organizations have increased their presence in Arauca. End Summary.

FARC AND ELN ACTIONS IN ARAUCA LEADS TO MASS DISPLACEMENTS

[2](#). Since January 6, 2008, over 1000 families living in several rural villages in the eastern part of Arauca department have fled their homes due to fighting between the FARC and ELN. The Arauca government reports that 4375 persons fleeing the fighting arrived in seven different communities; more than 50% of the IDPs were children. As of March 1, IDPs were located as follows:

- 1875 IDPs in Tame in south central Arauca, including over 50 indigenous families in Betoyes to Tame's east;
- 1270 IDPs in Saravena near the Venezuelan border;
- 595 IDPs in Fortul to the north of Tame; and
- 153 IDPs in the city of Arauca.

Additional IDPs have arrived in Arauquita on the Venezuelan border.

[3](#). The latest displacements represent an intensification of a trend from the previous two years in Arauca, where 8000 persons were displaced in both 2006 and 2007. The UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator (OCHA) reports that the increased displacement stems from the FARC's attempt to seize control of communities in central Arauca previously dominated

by the ELN. With these communities expecting to receive increased oil royalties in the near future, the FARC moved in--killing 20 community leaders and forcing local residents to flee. IDPs from the village of Arabia told the press in Tame that on January 8 the FARC murdered a local leader and ordered residents to leave immediately. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that in Pueblo Seco, the FARC expelled all 500 residents. Mines laid by the two terrorist groups--as well as forced recruiting--also produce displacement.

14. The FARC-ELN conflict in Arauca is two years old and centers on control of coca cultivation, drug routes, and extortion rackets targeting the local petroleum and cattle industries. The majority of the department's 240,000 residents are farmers, many of whom have been affected by the violence (the department has 40,000 registered IDPs). UN agencies estimate the FARC has 1000 members in Arauca, while the ELN has between 600-1000. In response to the FARC-ELN conflict, the GOC has increased its military presence in the department--setting up four more military bases in the region.

LACK OF THE HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE RESULTS IN SLOW INITIAL
RESPONSE

15. Prior to 2008, few humanitarian groups maintained a presence in Arauca. Besides the ICRC, which has had an office in Saravena for many years, several UN agencies conducted only periodic visits to the department. Only a few NGOs had projects in the department--most notably Medicins Sans Frontier (MSF)--which works with the small indigenous communities near Tame. The Colombian Red Cross, with the support of the French Red Cross, conducted occasional health interventions in the department. While the larger towns on the Venezuelan border had developed contingency plans and set up IDP response committees, the poorer towns in central Arauca had fewer humanitarian resources. Due to its limited humanitarian capacity and isolation, Tame in particular struggled to cope with the new arrivals. To help, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) and the GOC's Accion Social gave emergency training in Tame and other communities.

16. Initial relief distributions (food and emergency kits) by ICRC and Accion Social occurred in January and February. In addition, Accion Social collaborated with local IDP response committees and the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) to ensure the continued delivery of other forms of aid. PAHO set up a temporary presence in the area to work with a special unit of Arauca's Health Agency to coordinate health services in the communities. In Betoyes, MSF is covering indigenous health needs. Shelter was the greatest initial need, as many IDPs found shelter with friends and families or in community facilities unprepared to handle additional people. To improve living conditions, local authorities, along with PAHO and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), implemented water/sanitation improvements in several shelters.

17. The situation is gradually improving. UNHCR set up a new field office in the municipality of Arauca in February. and arranged workshops to educate the Public Forces (Military and Police) on their legal obligations to aid and protect IDPs. The World Food Program (WFP) which has made periodic emergency food aid missions to the department, is considering the establishment of a permanent presence. The most pressing need seems to be in the health sector as Arauca's few hospitals and clinics are ill equipped to cope with the large number of IDPs. The Ministry of Social Protection has pledged to help.

CURRENT SITUATION

18. As tensions between FARC, ELN, new criminal gangs and the Colombian military continue in the department, few IDPs have

returned to their homes. Shortly after opening its new office in the city of Arauca, UNHCR conducted field missions to the conflict areas. Along a five kilometer stretch of a road near Tame, UNHCR saw separate FARC, ELN and Colombian Army camps. Most villages visited were abandoned. In Puerto Seco, UNHCR found a village that looked like its residents had only recently left--clothes still hanging on lines, doors open, and chickens running around unattended. In the town, UNHCR encountered three elderly residents who had refused to leave in order to protect their small grocery store, now full of spider webs due to the lack of customer traffic.

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